

Michelle Reed

## PATIENT 231

### 1. Lost

They found them. Two of them. One with long black fingers. Yellow nails. I remember the nails. I'll make you like it. Clinched wrists. The other. Cratered face like cottage cheese. Black pores. They found them.

### 2. Ella, Booger Queen

Ella picks her nose when she thinks no one is watching. When we're outside, she sits on the sofa alone watching infomercials on TV because her doctor said the sun could kill her. (That's what she says.) So she sits inside with her finger in her nose and flicks rolled boogers onto the carpet.

Ella, I yell through the closed window and knock with both fists. Stop flicking that shit on the carpet.

But she leans back, sinking into the blue cushions, and props her feet over the back of the sofa.

### 3. Plinking

Martha told me to write. Write everything. Write what you remember. Start wherever you want. Put it on paper, she said.

Daddy's gun. A .22. We used to shoot in our backyard. Out in the country. Neighbors a half a mile away. We'd set up Coke cans. Plinking, he called it. Taught me how to use the scope. Take your time, Mae, he'd say, no hurry. Showed me how to squat and shoot, right elbow resting on my knee. Steady. Pyramid of cans twenty yards away. We'd take turns, shooting 'til our ears burned, counting the holes in the cans between rounds. Restack them. Build a pyramid and knock it down. See how far you could push the cans back. Watch them skip along, cutting flips in the air, as we floated them with bullets.

### 4. Ink

My room is white, like everything else. White curtains, white towels, white sheets that catch stains. White Martha, white doctors, white diplomas touched with black ink. Ph.D. Clinical Psychology. White pills, white paper, piles and piles of paper—both clean and crumpled, soiled with ink. White lights, white tile. And Ella, with her white dresses with yellow stains.

### **5. Shelter: a dream**

They took the ceiling away. The hail comes down through the gaps in the rafters and punches holes in the blanket I pressed over my face. It only rains on my head, and when it stops, Sally brings me a mirror. My skin is worn and dimpled, scarred from the impact of the frozen rain. Like I suffered severe scarring from acne. But worse.

And my legs are missing.

### **6. Spit**

Martha says anger is good. Get angry. Let it out.

It fills me, clotting up my bowels. It creeps around in my veins, pumps through my heart, pushes up through my throat until I can feel its bitter slime against my tongue.

Let it out, Mae, Martha says, and I spit. But I am never empty.

### **7. A Visit with My Mother**

She's wearing a yellow sundress and large shades that cover half her face, even though we're sitting inside. She visits every Sunday and brings me food from Reggie's downtown. The smell of barbecue and fried fish helps to mask the antiseptic smell that clouds our halls and the scent of boiled cabbage that clings to the cafeteria tables.

Did they tell you how much longer you'll be here?

Momma asks. She must have missed the meeting where they said that was the question to never ask.

I'm feeling better, I say.

Are you feeling better? she asks.

Yes, I say.

Can I get you anything? she asks.

She means cookies or a magazine. A box of chocolate or an extra blanket. Mom-gifts for sick kids. But I haven't been a kid for years.

I'm fine, I say.

She sits behind her dark shades and eats her potato salad and Boston-Butt in silence.

### **8. Friends**

Sally, like me, is not insane. Just unlucky. And that's why we're friends. Sally, though, is better off than I am. She said she got both of them.

### **9. Daddy's Gun**

I was fourteen the first time I picked it up. I remember it feeling

heavy. Heavy and cold. I was always scared of it as a kid. Didn't want to touch it.

One weekend when they went out of town, I stayed up late watching true crime documentaries and slept with it beside my bed. Loaded. Safety on. Safety off. Couldn't decide. I'd wake up in the middle of the night to change the setting. Sit up with the floorboards moaning and the cold steel warming between my legs, pointing at the empty house.

# 10. Wisdom: At Eighteen

Write what you know, Martha says.

Black fingers. Yellow nails. Clinched wrists. Red hair. Black pores pushing in.

Don't bleed on me, whore. I'll make you like it.

# 11. Superstition

Give me a goddamn mirror, I say, but that's not how it sounds. No one moves. Momma cries the way she did the night Papa James got drunk on the roof and landed on his head. Her tears mix with the snot running from her nose, form brief puddles around the corners of her mouth. A week later and I'm in the hospital: I want a fucking mirror.

The nurse puts one in my left hand—right arm's broken, wrapped like a mummy against my chest—and helps it up to my face.

Lips split and cracked like they've been held open for weeks—skin around the corners peeled back, new and raw. Swollen nose, blood crusted around the nostrils. Skin blue, yellowing in spots. The mirror breaks against the bedrail, glass seeping into my sheets, what's left flying across the room. Bandage cocooned around the left side of my head, and I can't feel my legs.

# 12. Saviors: a dream

Tonight it was Ella. They had her pinned behind the bridge in the park. Red was on top, his white ass shining in the dark. The other had his black fingers, yellow nails, wrapped around her throat, holding both arms behind her back. They didn't hear us coming. I took Red and Sally took Black, and we washed Ella's white dress in their blood.

# 13. A Visit with My Father

Daddy arrives at noon. Sharp, because he's always exactly on time. It's only been two weeks since I've seen him, but he looks older. He visits without Momma because it's easier that way.

How you doing today baby girl? Daddy asks and smiles. You would never know his front teeth were false. Disagreement

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offshore with a metal pipe.

I won the pot on *Jeopardy* this morning, I say.

Sounds pretty good then, he says.

(And it would be good if the pot consisted of more than peppermint sticks and Jolly Ranchers.)

I packed us a lunch, he says, and I follow him out to his truck, which is parked in the shade, tailgate down, blanket spread across the bed.

They treating you all right? he asks.

Except for the occasional thrashing, I say, yes. But you know what they say: healing hurts.

Don't I know it, he says. Speaking of, Annie had her staples removed yesterday.

(Annie is my accident-prone little sister whose clumsy ways land her in the emergency room on a regular-enough basis that the entire staff knows us by name.)

Hate to have missed that, I say.

It was quite an event, Daddy says. They had a game last night, and Coach Roberts asked her to sit on the bench with the rest of the team. I think she's finally getting over missing her senior year of basketball.

He pushes the hair away from my eyes and lifts my face to his.

Everyone asked about you, he says.

Yeah, I say.

I told them if you'd known this place was so nice you'd have moved out years ago.

I lay back and watch the wind shake the trees, hearing nothing but my father's voice.

#### **14. Supper: a dream**

Rita cooked cabbage for supper, and somehow everyone died. Except me—because I don't eat cabbage, even in my dreams—and Sally and Delana, the girl with the invisible bird, which died because she fed it her cabbage. Reggie stopped by with flowers for Martha, because they were dating (though in real life they would make an awful couple) and told us that that was the nature of cabbage. You had to be careful with it, or it could kill you. And he would know, too, because he owns a restaurant.

#### **15. Spin**

Mouth stretches at the corners. Tears against his weight. Don't bleed on me, whore, he says, and scrapes the roof of my mouth. I try to bite but can't close. His damp stink rubs against my teeth,

open lips. Want to scream but choke on the vomit that he pushes down. It's black. Black hair clogs my nose. No breath, no air. He spins in gray in front of me, white lights dance behind. I have no feet. Then he spits himself into the back of my throat and I'm empty again, washing the sidewalk with his poison and my blood. Eat it, he says.

#### 16. California

Sally says she wants to steal a hot-air balloon and float to California. People can lose themselves in California, she says. But I've never been particularly interested in California or being lost.

Think of it, she says. Spending all day on the beach, surfing and—

I don't know how to surf, I say. Because she is not my mother or my uncle Richard, whose philosophy it was to drown kids at an early age in order to increase their appreciation for the water, Sally has no way of understanding my fear of anything water-related.

We can learn, she says. And people in California don't even need jobs. Everything's provided for them. By the government. And tourists.

What about Arizona? I ask. You never hear anything about Arizona. That must mean it's safe. Bad things don't happen there like they do in New York and Miami. Or Idaho.

Too dry, Sally says. And I don't want to live on a desert and be eaten by coyotes. Do you want to be eaten by coyotes?

No, I guess not, I say.

Then California it is, she says.

#### 17. Ruger

It was 6 a.m. I'd been 17, officially, for 14 minutes when Daddy knocked on my bedroom door.

I couldn't wait, he said. He sat at the edge of my bed and placed a box on the pillow beside me.

What's this? I asked.

Inside was a stainless steel, blue finish, automatic .22. I pressed the cool steel against my face.

You like it? Daddy asked.

I love it, I said.

Momma didn't want to get you one, he said. She's afraid you'll shoot someone. You're not going to shoot anyone, are you baby doll?

Only if they piss me off, I said and laughed, because I don't have that kind of temper.

### 18. Water: a dream

Everyone from the nut shack is there, as well as Annie and our parents. We're all locked in my grandmother's house, except it's not in Doyline. It's on an island in the middle of the ocean, but the land's only big enough for the house. No yard, no driveway. And it's sinking. Not altogether, but piece by piece. An inch at a time, a part of the house falls off and floats away, taking pieces of grandmother's life—her dishes, her piano, the old love letters she thought she'd hidden well enough. Eventually it takes her. And Ella. And Skipper, the cat I always hated. Everyone is climbing on top of each other to stay away from the edges of the house. Sally has locked herself in the bathroom in the middle of the house and she keeps flushing the toilet.

### 19. Snap

Ella picks her nose during infomercials, I tell Sally. We're sitting outside beneath the oak tree dedicated in loving memory to Edna Joseph. Mrs. Joseph killed herself in 1976, and so her family planted a tree.

No way, Sally says.

She does, I say. I'll prove it.

Sally follows me to the window where I used to spy on Ella until I realized that Sally, like me, was not insane and we became friends. She squats below the frame and slowly lifts her head to the glass.

She doesn't look this way, I say. You can just stand up.

Let's sneak in, she says.

Why? I ask.

I'll grab my camera, she says. (It's a Polaroid her parents bought her for reasons that neither one of us understands.) It'll scare the shit out of her.

I follow Sally inside and sit by the door while she grabs her camera from her room. When she gets back, she drops to her knees and begins crawling to the TV room. You're too loud, Sally whispers. Stay here.

So I do. Sally loops the strap around her neck and rests the camera on her back as she crawls toward Ella. She sits with her back to the back of the sofa, adjusts the camera, and then slides on her stomach around the side.

You're a booger flicker, Sally yells and snaps the picture.

Ella screams and kicks Sally in the face.

**20. Shine**

Cratered face like cottage cheese. Black pores pushing in. The yellow nails that clench my wrists, close my throat. I'll make you like it. And it's Red shining in the moonlight. Spit and sweat drip from him, stick to my belly, thighs. I can't kick him out. Off.

**21. Flight**

You wait two years, because that's how long it takes. You sleep with blue steel shining under your pillow. You get sick in the mornings and stay up late at night. You wait two years, and then one runs away. The other, though, you can't miss. The other one. Red. You watch him die.

**22. Air**

We're not supposed to think about how long we've been here. (147 days.) That's what Martha says. It hinders the healing process. But I'm not crazy like Ella.

Sally's eye is black from where Ella kicked her in the face. She's pissed off, too, and has decided that Ella is definitely not allowed on our hot-air balloon. I agree. We don't need crazy people like Ella ruining our trip to California.